Responding Well:

Caring for the Church Community when Abuse is Reported

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Thanks

Much of this resource draws on Robin Hammeal-Urban's '***Wholeness after Betrayal: Restoring Trust in the Wake of Misconduct***' (Publication details). We are grateful for her expertise and generosity.

The resource was also informed by Safe Church Commission members' contributions during the Commission's seminars at the Lambeth Conference, 2022. We are grateful to Marcel Cesar, Daphne Audsley and Robin Hammeal-Urban.

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Responding Well: Caring for the Church Community when Abuse is Reported

Introducing the Anglican Communion Safe Church Commission

Safeguarding is a critical issue for the global Anglican Church.

Safeguarding is fundamental to our discipleship as followers of Christ. It is part of our gospel imperative and integral to the mission of the church. Preventing abuse within the Anglican Church worldwide is fundamental to the church's mission of sharing the good news of Jesus Christ.

In recent years, numerous cases of abuse have been reported within the Anglican Church. Many of these have not been managed well. As a result, several provinces (member churches) are being held to account by their governments and/or societies for safeguarding failures within their churches. Church leaders have sometimes compounded the suffering of those who have been subjected to abuse by responding inappropriately or inadequately when they disclosed the abuse. The church acknowledges that this needs to change and there is an urgency in ensuring that it does. This is about our basic responsibility and accountability as disciples of Christ.

The Work of the Safe Church Commission

The Anglican Communion Safe Church Commission ('the Commission') was therefore established at the request of the Anglican Consultative Council in 2016 (ACC-16). Its function is to promote the safety of people within churches of the Anglican Communion – with a particular focus on children, young people and vulnerable adults.

During the first phase of its work, from 2017 to 2019, the Commission developed safeguarding guidelines for implementation by each province: ***Guidelines to enhance the safety of all persons within the provinces of the Anglican Communion ('the Guidelines').*** The Guidelines were approved by the Anglican Consultative Council in 2019 (ACC-17) and are available in Spanish, French, Portuguese, Portuguese for Brazil, English, Korean and Japanese.

In the second phase until ACC-19, the Commission's role is as an advisory body for the effective implementation of the Guidelines in the provinces. The Commission develops resources, offers capacity development opportunities and supports the Provincial Safe Church Representatives.

This resource forms a part of a series produced by the Commission. Other resources in the series include:

- Safe Church: How to Start Guide
- Safe Church: Preventing Harm and Abuse
- Safe Church: Responding Well When Abuse is Disclosed or Reported
- Safe Church: Dealing with Allegations of Abuse

All can be downloaded for free from the Anglican Communion website on the Safe Church Commission page: **anglicancommunion.org/safechurchresources**

Glossary

This glossary provides the meanings of certain important words used in this document.

Abuse is usually an ongoing pattern of behaviour (although it can be a single incident) which:

a. causes physical, sexual, psychological, emotional or spiritual harm to another person, or

b. is intended to cause harm to another person, or

c. which may place another person at risk of harm.

Members of the clergy and lay leaders can be reported for perpetrating abuse and the abuse can be the focus of disciplinary action. A comprehensive definition of abuse can be found in the Safe Church Guidelines: **anglicancommunion.org/community**

A **church worker** is any member of the clergy or lay person who is actively involved in the ministry of the church.

Victim: is one of the terms used to describe those that have experienced any kind of abuse. All abuse is traumatic and impacts of abuse often continue long after the event(s) and the term 'victim' highlights the fact that the person who is abused had no choice in the matter – the abuse was imposed on them by a person who held greater power, it was not their fault and it caused them suffering. However, the term victim can also make a person seem helpless, passive or weak and activists argue strongly that the term 'survivor' should be used instead.

'Survivor' suggests a more active or resistant response to abuse and can be a helpful term in the activism/advocacy space and when we want to emphasise agency, healing and forward movement. However, 'survivor' can make the suffering that a person has experienced seem less significant and it can also suggest that a person has completely overcome the abuse, which is almost never the case. Neither term completely captures the shifting experiences of someone who has experienced abuse. Sometimes the term victim-survivor is used to emphasise that one can be both at the same time.

In this document, when the term 'victim' is used it is to emphasise the harm caused by abuse.

The **primary victim** is the person who has been abused

Secondary victims include all other persons who have suffered harm as a result of the abuse of the primary victim. These could include members of the primary victim's family and friends as well as members of the family of the abuser, other people working/serving in the church community and members of the church community.

Trauma-informed care is an approach that recognises and takes into account the impacts of trauma on a person's life. It focuses on creating a safe, supportive environment and offering care in a way that avoids causing further harm or stress to the person.

Victim/Survivor-centred care is an approach that focuses on the needs, rights, and preferences of those who have experienced trauma and abuse. It supports healing by providing a safe, respectful and empowering environment, where victim-survivors make their own decisions about their care and well-being.

Introduction

When a church leader abuses a member of the congregation the person who is abused is the primary victim. We now know that the impacts of abuse on primary victims can be severe, life-changing and long-lasting. The Safe Church Commission resource: ***Responding well when abuse is disclosed or reported*** offers guidance on how to offer appropriate care and support when a primary victim discloses abuse in a church context. However, primary victims are not the only people who are impacted by the abuse. Various people close to the primary victim and the abuser will be impacted, particularly once the abuse is disclosed or reported. The impacts/fallout of abuse within a congregation can be devastating to individual members, as well as to the church as a community. These people can all be considered secondary victims of the abuse.

This resource offers guidance to church leaders and members of a church community on how to respond well to the secondary victims of abuse.

Abuse is a misuse of power

Power is the ability to impose your own will on a given situation: you get to decide what is going to happen in the situation and you are able to make sure it happens. A person can use this power with good intentions and effects for others or they can choose to use power to meet their own needs and desires to benefit themselves whatever the cost to others.

People come to have and hold power in different ways. In the church some of the factors that give people power include:

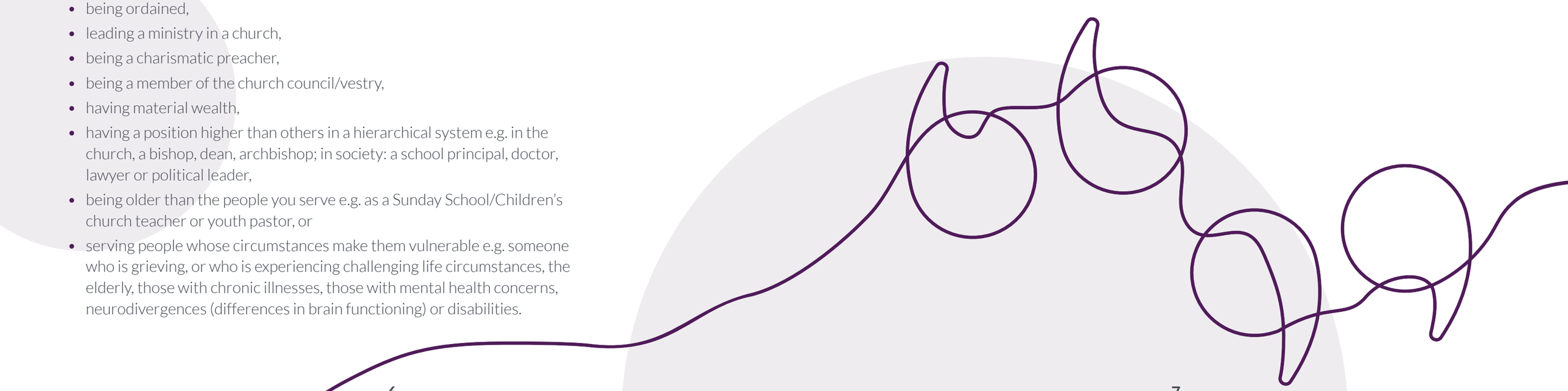
- being ordained,
- leading a ministry in a church,
- being a charismatic preacher,
- being a member of the church council/vestry,
- having material wealth,
- having a position higher than others in a hierarchical system e.g. in the church, a bishop, dean, archbishop; in society: a school principal, doctor, lawyer or political leader,
- being older than the people you serve e.g. as a Sunday School/Children's church teacher or youth pastor, or
- serving people whose circumstances make them vulnerable e.g. someone who is grieving, or who is experiencing challenging life circumstances, the elderly, those with chronic illnesses, those with mental health concerns, neurodivergences (differences in brain functioning) or disabilities.

Responding Well: Caring for the Church Community when Abuse is Reported

Although being ordained brings with it a certain level of power, lay persons who have been employed or served in the church for a long time can also have and hold significant power, as can families who have generations-long histories with the church. Those who donate large sums of money can also have significant power within the church. It is also possible for a person to exercise a great deal of power within a particular sector of church life e.g. women's ministry, children's/youth ministry, counselling ministry, worship ministry or choir and so on.

A church is therefore a situation where people who are relatively powerful are brought together with people who have less power, and who may be considered vulnerable due to their circumstances. We know that abuse always happens in a situation and/or relationship where there is an imbalance of power: one person has more power than the other and uses that power to manipulate and abuse another person. We also know that most people who hold power have no desire to harm others and will use that power for others' good. However, there will be some who use their position of power to treat others badly (bullying, harassment, verbal abuse, emotional abuse) and there will also be some who desire to sexually, emotionally and/or physically abuse children or adults who are vulnerable and target specific individuals, building relationships which lead to abuse (in Western contexts this is called grooming).

Abuse by a church worker can therefore be considered an abuse of power. Abuse of power is a sin and has no place in our church.



Abuse by a church leader is a betrayal of trust

A leader's position in a church causes people to trust him or her. Abuse by clergy or lay leaders is therefore also a betrayal of trust – the trust that the community placed in the leader to act in the community's best interest. In the case of clergy committing abuse is also a violation of their ordination vows. The opportunity to engage in abuse was created by the relationship of trust and the church leader betrayed this trust by putting their own needs and desires before those of the congregation members or those who come into a church.

Abuse can have profound negative effects on victim-survivors, changing how they view the world, engage with others and understand themselves. Abuse by someone that was trusted and respected and who should have kept people safe, destroys trust. This can have a negative effect on one's sense of safety in the world, self-esteem, and general well-being, as well as on relationships with others and with God. The trauma of abuse can have both physical and psychological impacts. Withdrawal, depression, and anxiety are common responses. The impacts of abuse can be devastating and long-lasting. Nobody should have to experience this and particularly not within the church.

The effect of this betrayal – this broken trust – is often widespread. It affects all members of the church community and the community as a whole, not just the primary victims.

Who is affected when a church worker commits abuse?

In addition to the primary victim, many other people could be impacted by abuse within the church. These are secondary victims and they could include:

- Family members, friends and supporters of the primary victim(s)
- Family members (spouse, children and wider family) of the (alleged) abuser/offender
- Friends/supporters of the (alleged) abuser/offender
- The rector/priest in charge of the parish if the accused person is not the priest
- Other staff in the parish
- Other leaders in the church community
- Adults in the church community
- Children and youth in the church community
- Other clergy in the same denomination (if the alleged abuser or primary victim was ordained)
- Clergy in other denominations
- Those who are responsible for responding to the disclosure/report including the bishop, registrar, chancellor, investigators, legal team
- Those responsible for providing pastoral care to all involved: counsellors/ pastoral care team
- Other church communities in the diocese
- People who attend church in other denominations
- People in the wider community/society who are not part of a church
- People who are considering leadership positions in the church
- People who take up leadership positions following an incident of abuse within that church e.g. the next priest in the congregation
- The safeguarding officers who have to address the allegation of abuse

This is not an exhaustive list. Others can be added to this list in your own context. But it does give a sense of how wide the impacts will be. In addition, the reputation and credibility of the church where the abuse occurred is likely to be negatively affected, as well as society's trust in all churches, particularly if a church does not put the victim's needs first and tries to cover up the abuse.

When abuse is disclosed in a church community, it is therefore necessary to consider and respond in compassionate and effective ways to those who are impacted by the abuse.

Effective care for the church community

When there are allegations of abuse, we may think that very few people in the congregation know about it. In truth, it is usually the case that many people know that something has happened, but their knowledge may be inaccurate. Rumours may spread and cause great harm.

To help a church community come to terms with abuse within their congregation, members need accurate, timely information about the abuse and opportunities to process that information as a community.

Responses to disclosures of abuse within a church community

Abuse in a church context has both immediate and delayed impacts on the whole community. When a church community experiences a trauma, the impact may be felt or expressed in various ways including:

- Loss of energy or feeling of paralysis;
- Decreased trust of church leaders (which may be transferred onto future leaders in the community);
- Divisions within the church community;
- Some church members feeling isolated and withdrawing from a particular group within the church or from the church entirely;
- Anger being expressed in a range of ways, or being focused onto unrelated issues, or exaggerated responses to minor issues;
- People silencing themselves and others about the traumatic event;
- Despair about the future of the church community or about the church in general;
- Feeling overly responsible for what happened, for acting in certain ways or failing to act;
- Trying to push for quick fixes using Christian concepts such as prayer, forgiveness, and reconciliation without consultation and without allowing the hurt and betrayal to be felt and expressed;
- Difficulty making decisions that need to be made and taking necessary actions.

These impacts of trauma can lead to intense conflict within the church community causing abrupt and dramatic divisions. The impacts can also continue to be evident for years, causing a more gradual breakdown in the life and vitality of the community and its ministries, unless steps are taken to help the community process the trauma, and find healing.

Different responses within a church community

When faced with abuse in their church community, members respond in different ways. They could respond with anger–anger at the offender, at the bishop, or at the victim(s) or whoever reported the abuse. In a church context, members are more likely to blame and exclude the victim or the whistleblower than the alleged abuser and it is necessary to take steps to protect victims and others from this.

Some members may feel sad. Sadness may come from seeing that their beloved church isn't what they thought or trusted it to be. Some members blame themselves, especially if they saw and ignored warning signs or if they had a role in bringing the priest to serve in the parish. Some may feel shame for being affiliated with a church where abuse occurred. Some members will lose trust in their own ability to determine who is trustworthy.

In short, this betrayal can break down trust in oneself, in other members, and even in God. One should not underestimate the impacts on community members' faith, which may be challenged, shaken or destroyed by such events.

Members may struggle to make sense of the fact that a beloved leader, who may have offered wonderful ministry and perhaps provided deeply meaningful pastoral care, also committed abuse. It is hard to hold both these realities at one time. Both can be true. We are all capable of doing good and also of making choices that hurt others. The fact that a priest, for example, engaged in abuse does not undo the good ministry they did. However, they need to be held accountable for inflicting harm and betraying trust, and the community must be protected.

When there have been allegations of abuse against a church leader, a church community can begin to develop unhealthy ways of being together. For example, people might stop sharing information openly and rumours may be shared within groups. Members of the church could start blaming each other for the challenges in the community. Without appropriate care and support the congregation can become divided with some supporting the church leader and others the victim-survivor.

Further divisions can develop based on who has information about the abuse and who does not (even if that information is inaccurate), and there is often a lack of trust in future clergy who come to serve in that community. A church community that once felt familiar and safe can now feel strange and tense and unsafe.

When there is abuse, care and support of church communities is essential. Without it, destructive patterns of relationships and behaviour can develop, whether consciously or unconsciously, and continue for decades. Churches need to develop ways of communicating, processing and accepting the reality of what happened, allowing feelings to surface, be expressed and be acknowledged without judgement and defensiveness. This can be a painful process which requires careful facilitation to create safe spaces within which these honest conversations can take place. It can ultimately be a source of growth and healing for individuals and for the church community as a whole.

Through this work, members can learn to confront their own reactions to power and abuse, extend care to one another, recognise and acknowledge any harm they may have caused others, begin to restore trust with one another, and reconcile relationships within the congregation. Doing this work equips members to engage in God's mission of restoration, healing and reconciliation in other settings. As the Body of Christ, this is the work we are called to do.

Who should provide pastoral care to the church community?

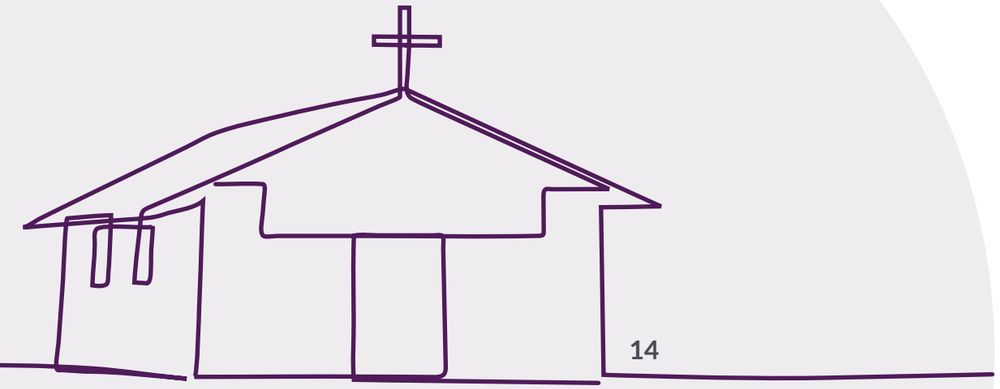
A small team of people from within the church community, supported by the diocesan safeguarding adviser or a similar person who is trained and experienced in pastoral care, could offer support and care to the church community.

However, it may be difficult for members of the church that has been affected to offer pastoral care as everyone may be struggling with their own responses. If it is practical, you could ask a team from a nearby parish to offer pastoral care to the church community.

Those who provide pastoral care to members of the church community need to:

- be emotionally mature individuals who are able to listen well and show empathy;
- (if possible) have some training or experience in trauma-informed, victim/survivor-centred pastoral care, safeguarding, social work, psychology or a related field;
- be able to communicate clearly and directly, even about difficult topics that may not usually be spoken about;
- have a reputation as someone who does not gossip and who can be careful with sensitive and confidential information;
- be respected and trusted by the community;
- be robust and resilient;
- be able to avoid attempts by any person to manipulate them into taking sides; and
- not have any direct connection to those involved in the case as this would constitute a conflict of interest; and
- be able to set aside the prevailing opinions and emotions of the church community and focus on providing care.

The people providing care should never be the same people who will investigate or decide the outcome of a case. It is also important that same people are not supporting both the victim and the alleged abuser. It may also be necessary to have different people provide care to the alleged abuser and the alleged abuser's family.



How to provide care for the church community

- Make the church community aware that pastoral care is available if they feel they need support or just to talk through their feelings about what has happened. Offer the name and contact details of a go-to person to contact for pastoral care.
- For anyone needing pastoral care when abuse has happened within the church community, coming onto church premises may be difficult. Be aware that it may be easier to offer pastoral care in homes or different community spaces where people feel free to speak openly.
- There will be members of the church community who are more directly impacted by the abuse, such as family and close friends of the victim or alleged abuser. It may be more appropriate to offer pastoral care to these secondary victims individually or in family or friendship groups. It would be best to meet separately with supporters of the victim and supporters of the alleged abuser at this stage. If there are enough people available to offer pastoral care, it should be different people who offer support to each group.
- A disclosure or report of abuse within the church may be particularly difficult for those who have previously experienced abuse in their lives, in whatever context. For many victim-survivors of abuse the church can be a sanctuary and can offer them a sense of safety. When abuse happens in the church, their sense of safety may be shattered. It may therefore be helpful to offer a support group for survivors of abuse. The church could frame this as a writing or journalling group, a stress management course or a craft group as the idea of coming together just to talk may feel too vulnerable for survivors.
- It is important for community members to have a chance to talk about how they feel about what has happened in the church. Small group discussions would be a good way to do this, and using existing groups like Bible study or fellowship groups could work well. These discussions should be led by someone who can focus the discussion on how people are feeling, rather than on the details of what happened or the rumours. This way, the community can process what happened while also respecting the privacy of those directly affected.
- A facilitator may guide such a discussion with a few simple questions:
  - *How are you impacted by what has happened?*
    Encourage people to talk about their own feelings and responses. You don't need to change their minds or 'fix' them or put them right if they are experiencing difficult emotions. Just acknowledge what they are feeling.
  - *What do you need at this time from the community?*
    It is difficult to know what different people need in a situation like this. It is best to ask. Peoples' responses offer guidance in terms of what to prioritise. People may also be able to offer support to one another when they hear what each other is needing.
  - *What can you offer at this time to the community?*
    This doesn't need to be a specific action. It can be an attitude. It can be prayer. It can be a commitment to keep turning up at church, or a fellowship group, or a commitment to staying away from situations that make them angry. It can be a commitment to refrain from sharing rumours.

Effective care for the alleged abuser

Pastoral care should always be offered to church workers who are facing allegations of abuse. The alleged abuser is likely to be in crisis and there is a risk that they may respond in extreme ways to being accused and exposed. An alleged abuser is still a member of the church community even if they have been suspended from active participation in the life of the church while an investigation is taking place. Being a safe church is about caring for all members, particularly those who are facing crisis.

Pastoral care should also be extended to the family of the alleged abuser who may have been unaware of the situation and will have had their lives turned upside down by revelations about their loved one.

Appropriate communication to the church community

It can be tricky to manage communication within the church community after a report of abuse. Various people are likely to have some knowledge of aspects of the case and if no information is communicated, it is likely that rumours will circulate. Rumours and half-truths can increase the suffering of the entire community. However, it is also essential to protect the privacy of those directly affected by the report of abuse and to maintain confidentiality as far as possible.

It is helpful to issue a simple statement which acknowledges the report of abuse such as the following:

The safeguarding lead/priest/church leadership have received a safeguarding report. We are following procedures to investigate and respond to the report. We are committed to a fair process and to providing pastoral care to all who are affected. If you wish to talk to someone about how this has impacted you please contact _____. As soon as there is any significant update, we will communicate this to the church community. In the meantime we ask you to avoid speculation and sharing rumours. Please focus your prayers on all those who are working to resolve this matter and all those in our church community who are suffering at this time.

Effective care for those who provide pastoral care and support in cases of abuse

All those involved in pastoral care for those impacted by abuse and its disclosure in a church should receive training, with regular updates, and be supported in their role. No matter how well-trained or experienced someone is, they will be affected by supporting people in crisis. Working with people who may be confused, angry or frightened can be emotionally and spiritually draining.

Being a safe church is about caring and healing. Those who care for others cannot do so unless they in turn are cared for. Those providing care need support to sustain their spiritual well-being and some form of supervision for their counselling or pastoral care role. Supervision means formal meetings between a church worker and another professional with similar skills, knowledge and experience where one's pastoral care practice can reviewed together and evaluated. This gives one the benefit of another professional viewpoint, it improves self-awareness and helps one to remain focused on challenging tasks. It is a valuable part of a life-long learning process.

In conclusion

When abuse has occurred within a church community the impacts on the entire community can be significant and widespread. It is not sufficient to hope and pray that these impacts will resolve themselves over time. The church community will need clear communication of the necessary information to avoid rumours spreading. They will also need good quality ongoing pastoral care towards healing. Certain individuals will need more specialised care from wise and equipped pastoral carers or counsellors. As the church we are called to do this work of healing and restoring relationships within our church communities.

Additional Resources

On caring for a church community after abuse by a church worker has been disclosed or reported

Wholeness after Betrayal: Restoring Trust in the Wake of Misconduct.
Hammeal-Urban, Robin
Morehouse Publishing ((978-0-8192-3177-2)

To Heal and Not to Hurt: A fresh approach to safeguarding in Church
Rosie Harper and Alan Wilson
DLT (978-0-232-53392-1)

Letters to a Broken Church
Janet Fife and Gilo, editors
Ekklesia (978-0-99329-426-6)

Escaping the Maze of Spiritual Abuse: Creating healthy Christian cultures
Lisa Oakley and Justin Humphreys
SPCK (978-0-281-08131-8)

Other **Safe Church/Safeguarding Resources** produced by the **Safe Church Commission**

Safe Church: How to Start Guide
(available in English, Spanish, French, and Portuguese)

Preventing Harm and Abuse

Responding Well When Abuse is Disclosed or Reported

Dealing with Allegations of Abuse

Responding Well: Caring for the Church Community when Abuse is Reported

‘Safeguarding is fundamental to our discipleship as followers of Christ. It is part of our gospel imperative and integral to the mission of the church.’

There are other resources to help you as you continue your work on the Safe Church Commission website **www.anglicancommunion.org/scc**

Please contact the Safe Church Commission at **scc@anglicancommunion.org** if you have suggestions, questions or would like to have a conversation about the Safe Church work you are doing.

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